A Sordid Business

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If ever a tragic story cried out for dignity and restraint in the telling, it was *The Death of a President,* for it is difficult to imagine an event which shocked a whole populace and a whole world more than the assassination of President Kennedy. Yet the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of William Manchester's book—if not the book itself—have been marked by tasteless controversy, commercial greed, morbid retrospection, rampant gossip-mongering, and unconscionable invasions of privacy which have done no service either to history or to the memory of the man.

It was already well past time to call a halt to this sordid business before the publication in *Commentary* magazine of expurgations which had been culled by the author from his first draft before publication. It is not necessary to establish whether all these scrap-basket leavings ever were in the original manuscript in the first place. The editor says they were, while Mr. Manchester says he does not recall some of them. The point is that they were no more intended for publication than would be the first draft of this editorial.

It should not be necessary to defend the right of an author to second thoughts before publication. In the case of Mr. Manchester, the right is the more absolute in the light of his travail. If he overwrote when he first sat down to record the results of months of grim research, he was doubtless at that point overwrought, and it is to his credit and that of his publishers that highly emotional and embittered references to President Johnson were excised from the final draft.

But it is to the credit of none of those involved that these and other excisions should have been allowed to become the object of a lurid and insatiable public curiosity. Once this happened, it was probably inevitable that more and more of the edited material would be dug out and the curiosity satisfied. The hope here is that the latest contribution to cheap sensationalism will be the last.